

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



## Soft Drinks in Schools

Marion Nestle's excellent article highlights the outrageous practice of "pouring rights" contracts that give soft drink companies exclusive rights to sell their products in specific schools or school districts. Coca-Cola and Pepsi are fiercely competing to sign up as many schools as they can, and many of our public schools appear willing to sell out to the highest bidder. However, this is more than just a question of money. This practice affects the health of our children.

Pouring rights contracts influence not only what children drink, but also what they eat in school. As Dr. Nestle points out, students who have access to soft drinks in school are less likely to eat the school lunch. This should concern public health professionals and educators because students need the nutrients provided in a balanced school lunch, and they are learning lifelong eating habits.

Dr. Nestle is correct that contracts such as these undermine efforts to establish government funding for public education, but they are the inevitable response to decades of inadequate funding for schools. Twenty-five years ago, New York City was in a deep fiscal crisis and all "non-educational" activities such as music, art, and sports—and even funding for librarians—were eliminated. Principals were forced to beg parents for donations, they asked schoolchildren to sell candy and other items, and they generally welcomed any other sources of funding for school sports and extracurricular activities. This eased the pressure on the city budget and, unfortunately, has become institutionalized as a way of meeting school needs today. The best money-raisers are sales of junk food—soda, candy, chips, etc. Schools take in more money from these sales than from any other fundraising activity, and they won't give them up easily, particularly as education

budgets still do not meet the needs of schools, despite surpluses in the city's coffers.

I visit New York City's public schools regularly, and I am always horrified at what I see children eating for lunch. Almost all schools above the elementary level sell some type of junk food through cafeteria vending machines or school stores, and many students purchase these foods daily rather than eat the five-course lunch that the majority of them are entitled to get free.

I am convinced that the only way to control the commercial invasion of our schools is through legislation or regulation. Public health professionals and educators should encourage and support government efforts to limit sales of food that compete with school meals. And all of us should work to increase funding for education so that schools don't have to go begging.

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## Bioterrorism "Preparedness": Dual Use or Poor Excuse?

In their Viewpoint in the July/August 2000 issue of *Public Health Reports*, M. R. Fraser and D. L. Brown express concerns about the risk of bioterrorism and the adequacy of bioterrorism preparedness.<sup>1</sup> They are not alone. Bioterrorism appears regularly on public health conference agendas, government advisories, and lists of health care challenges. The US federal budget for fiscal year 2000 allocated more than \$10 billion to counter terrorism, including more than \$1.5 billion specifically for bioterrorism.<sup>2</sup> Enormous attention in the media as well as medical and health journals reflects, and perhaps amplifies, widespread concern. But is this concern justified?

Fraser and Brown list a number of potential threats to public health: food inadvertently contaminated with hepatitis A virus; a large outbreak of influenza; water pollution caused by floods; "the willful contamination of food products with *Salmonella*"; and a "terrorist's release of aerosolized *Bacillus anthracis* (anthrax) in a city center."<sup>1</sup> This list mixes fact and fiction and requires closer attention. Virus contamination, flu outbreaks, and water pollution are three of many public health problems that actually occur in the US every year and claim hundreds or even thousands of lives. In contrast, willful *Salmonella*